

Myth #53: The George Washington Gale Ferris House—Or Is It? by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

Who hasn't heard of the Ferris Wheel? One can't imagine a carnival or amusement park without one. Ferris wheels have been around since 1893 and the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. What many people don't know is that the inventor of the famous amusement ride, George Washington Gale Ferris, Jr., spent a portion of his childhood in Carson City and the house at 311 W. Third Street in which he lived still stands.



George W. G. Ferris, Sr. moved his family, including five-year-old George Jr., from Galesburg, Illinois to Carson Valley, Nevada Territory, in the summer of 1864. Young George, the tale goes, drew his inspiration for the Ferris Wheel by observing the water wheels on the Carson River and imagining what it would be like riding around on one of the buckets.

The Ferris family did not reside in Carson Valley very long however. According to an entry in the Ormsby County Deed Books, Ferris, Sr. purchased property on the southwest side of Carson City on March 10, 1868. This is where the confusion begins and people's fascination with the inventor of the Ferris Wheel and his family's residence has distorted the facts.

The Historic American Buildings Survey for Carson City, published by the National Park Service in 1974, claimed that the house in which the Ferris family lived was constructed by, or for, Ferris, Sr. circa 1869. "Stylistically," the report stated, "the original portions of the house accord well with this date." The 1868-69 Directory for Carson City lists George W. Ferris as a "Farmer" residing on "3rd, between Nevada and Division" streets.

What the researchers didn't do was consult the tax assessment records to determine if there were improvements, such as a house, on the property before the Ferris purchase.

New Yorkers Gregory A. and Mary A. Sears previously owned the property. Gregory, James, and William Sears had purchased much of southern Carson City in August 1859 from William Ormsby. The Sears brothers and partner James Thompson subdivided the land by February 1860 and began selling lots in the Sears, Thompson, and Sears (S, T&S) Addition.

The first territorial assessment rolls for Ormsby County in 1862-63 show Gregory Sears paying taxes on the land in question, lots 2 & 3 of block 28, S,T&S Addition . There is no reference to an improvement. However, when Sears paid his taxes the next year on property in block 28 the records note an improvement with an assessed valuation of \$2,000. A large structure of some type had been built on the property sometime after March 1863, the end of the previous tax year, and January 1864, when Sears again paid his taxes.

Further proof that the structure was his residence is found in the Carson City directories. The 1862 directory has him residing on the southeast corner of Ormsby (now Curry) and King streets, where he owned a brick store identified in the tax rolls. The 1863 directory, on the other hand, lists him living on "Third near Nevada." At the time, Gregory Sears' family included his wife Mary, the couple marrying in Michigan in 1853, and nine-year-old daughter Lillie. Over the next five years, and before Sears sold the land and house to George Ferris, two more daughters, Jennie and Helen, were born to the couple according to census records.

The 1866 tax rolls describe the improvement on Sears' property in block 28, S,T&S Addition as a "dwelling house" and the 1867 tax rolls call it a "residence."

The definitive piece of evidence is found in the April 29, 1870 edition of the *Carson City Daily Appeal*. A story describing the many fruit trees G.W.G Ferris had planted around his premises on Third Street, referred to his house as "the old Sears place."

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Gregory Sears, and not George Ferris, was responsible for the construction of the house at 311 W. Third Street. An examination of later tax rolls do not suggest that Ferris tore down the Sears house to build a new one, or that it may have burned and was replaced. The earliest known image of the house dates back to 1875 and the exterior is essentially the same today although some modifications were made in 1906 by Ferris' son-in-law.

Gregory Sears and his family moved across the street to a new house on the northwest corner of Fourth and Division streets in 1868, before leaving Carson City by late 1870 for Butler County, Kansas, east of Wichita. Sears served as Butler County Justice of the Peace in 1871 shortly after his arrival. In the 1881 session of the Kansas Legislature, he represented the 90th District as a Republican in the House of Representatives. Sears died at the age of 78 on October 16, 1905 in the house of his youngest daughter, Helen H. Gardner, and is buried in Belle Vista Cemetery in El Dorado, the Butler County seat.



In the eleven years the Sears family lived in Carson City, Gregory had served as Ormsby County Public Administrator. Both he and his wife, Mary, were actively involved in the Presbyterian Church. In 1863-64, Gregory, as a ranking member of the Presbyterian Church Board of Trustees, along with Secretary of Nevada Territory Orion Clemens, oversaw the construction of the church two blocks north of his house. Two humorous letters between Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) and Gregory Sears, dated January 23, 1864, regarding a fund-raiser for the church are published in Volume I of *Mark Twain's Letters* (1988). Twain's speaking performance on January 27 at the Ormsby County Courthouse was the first of his career before an audience that had paid to hear him.

Pioneers Gregory Sears and his younger brothers are virtually forgotten in Carson City history. While there is a street named after real estate partner James Thompson, no thoroughfare in the capital city bears the name Sears.

Gregory Sears' visible legacy is his house. While all the contemporary literature and maps, and even a marker on the house at 311 W. Third Street, credit George Washington Gale Ferris, Sr. with its construction, thanks to the efforts of Mella Harmon, Architectural Historian at the State Historic Preservation Office, the structure was officially renamed the Sears-Ferris House on July 27, 2000. Sears' descendants in Butler County, Kansas, and elsewhere will surely appreciate setting the record straight.

Photo 1: Gregory Alvin Sears in 1881 ([Kansas State Historical Society](#), Copy and Reuse Restrictions Apply)

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